

Focus on a Federation Member: Gaston County Museum of Art & History

By Jeff Pruett, Director, Gaston County Museum of Art & History

The Gaston County Museum of Art and History invites you to learn more about its history, its current activities, and its plans for the future.

Museum Beginnings

The Gaston County Museum has its roots in America's bicentennial, which reawakened pride in the country's collective past. To promote an understanding of that heritage, two community leaders, Jeanne Rauch and Lucy Penegar, along with other members of the county's Bicentennial Commission, requested seed money and assistance in the form of manpower/ personnel from the Gaston County Commissioners. This was soon supplemented with additional financial support from the town of Dallas, the North Carolina Bicentennial Commission, the Gastonia Junior Service League, Jeanne G. Rauch, and the Ralph S. Robinson Family Foundation.

On October 15, 1975, the Gaston County Art & History Museum was formed as a cultural project of the Gaston County Bicentennial Commission. On March 23, 1976, Gaston County Art & History Museum received its tax-exempt status and became a legal entity supported by Gaston County and governed by an independent board of trustees. On July 4, 1976, Gaston County Art & History Museum opened its doors to the public on the second floor of the Dallas courthouse. The museum was initially administered by a volunteer staff of dedicated men and women from throughout the



The Gaston County Museum is housed in the former Hoffman Hotel, built in 1852. Museum buildings also include an early 1900s train depot, now used as the Annie Biggers Furr Learning Station, and the Stowe Carriage House.

county. Gaston County hired Alan D. Waufle as the first museum director in late 1976.

Early in 1977, Dallas' original turn-of-the-century Carolina and Northwestern Railroad depot, which was slated to be destroyed, was given to the museum and moved to a vacant lot beside the Dallas library. It became the museum's Learning Station, then the Exhibit Design Shop, and is now currently the Anne Biggers Furr Learning Station. Not long after the depot was donated, the Southern Railway gave a railroad caboose which provided much needed museum space, and it was relocated beside the restored depot.

Search for a New Building

Because of the limited exhibit space and restrictive access, the trustees began looking for an

alternative to the old courthouse site in 1977-1978. Trustees Lucy Penegar, Robert Ragan, and Dr. Simeon Adams initiated talks with Mrs. Kathryn Shuford McKeithen, who owned the building.

On April 22, 1979, Dallas native Dr. William C. Friday, president of the Consolidated University of North Carolina, kicked off the first membership drive from the steps of the old courthouse. Museum Board President, Robert Ragan, visited with textile executives Daniel J. Stowe and J. Harold Lineberger of Belmont, and Caldwell Ragan of Gastonia in October and November of 1979 to secure support for a permanent museum home. Realization of a permanent home for the museum occurred on December 28, 1979. A ceremony was held on the steps of the 1852 Hoffman Hotel in Dallas on

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December 31, 1979, for the purpose of dedicating the new museum property.

On August 12, 1982, the museum's official name was changed by charter amendment from Gaston County Art & History Museum, Inc. to Gaston County Museum of Art & History, Inc. On May 26, 1984, the first floor of the Hoffman Hotel and adjoining store building were opened to the public.

In 1980, Daniel J. Stowe, a Belmont textile executive, located a group of magnificently restored horse-drawn vehicles that belonged to a local collector. He purchased twelve sleighs and carriages and donated them to the museum for its first permanent collection. A carriage gallery opened in the store building annex as the *Wheels and Runners* exhibit in 1984. The Stowe Carriage House opened on October 3, 1991, after a formal dedication ceremony.

The Museum Today

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learning. Through its exhibitions and programs for adults, families, and schools, GCM stimulates the imagination and advances understanding of history and art. Come visit with us for free and step back in time as you view the Greek Revival architecture and Victorian furnishings. The museum houses two floors of changing exhibits, on history and/or art; the Daniel Stowe Carriage House, featuring the state's largest collection of horse-drawn vehicles; and the permanent *Carolinas Textile Exhibit*, showing the area's primary commodity from the late 1800's to mid-1900's—cotton mills and the lives that revolved around them.

Currently, the museum has plans to renovate the original Gaston County jail located in Dallas so

visitors can experience this historic treasure. Recently, the museum's train depot was renovated through support from the Anne Biggers Furr family and the Carrie E. and Lena V. Glenn Foundation. Since this renovation, we have hosted several concert series in addition to numerous art exhibitions. In addition, the museum added a new porch and has plans to renovate its sun porch in the near future.

You can learn more about the museum by visiting www.gastoncountymuseum.org or by calling (704) 922-7681. Come see us!

Chatham County Courthouse and Historical Museum to Reopen in April

After three years of planning, design, construction, challenges, and anticipation, the historic 1881 Chatham County Courthouse is expected to reopen on April 20 in Pittsboro. The courthouse suffered a devastating fire in 2010 that destroyed most of the roof and much of the building's interior.

The Chatham County Historical Association plans to open its new museum on April 20 as well. Much of the collection of the Chatham County Museum, which was located inside the courthouse, was spared exten-

sive damage from fire or smoke. Since the fire, CCHA has worked to raise more than \$100,000 to design and equip the new museum, which is located on the first floor of the courthouse.

Plans are still being finalized for the activities that will take place on April 20 to mark the reopening of the courthouse and of the museum. Be sure to visit the CCHA website (www.chathamhistory.org) for more information as April 20 approaches.